



Message

From Jim Wallis, "God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It"

Dare we search for the politics of God? It's much easier to just use God to justify our politics. Yet, if we look into biblical and other holy texts, we find a God who speaks about "politics" all the time. The place to begin to understand the politics of God is with the prophets, the ancient moral articulators in the Scriptures. What were their subjects? Quite secular topics really – land, labor, capital, wages, debt, taxes, equity, fairness, courts, prisons, immigrants, other races and peoples, economic divisions, social justice, war, and peace – the stuff of politics.

Whom were the prophets speaking to? Usually to rulers, kings, judges, employers, landlords, owners of property and wealth, and even religious leaders. They spoke to "the nations" – it was the powerful who were most often the prophets' target audience; those in charge of things were the ones called to greatest accountability. And whom were the prophets usually speaking for? Most often the dispossessed, widows and orphans (read: poor single moms), the hungry, the homeless, the helpless, the least, last, and lost. Is God into class warfare? No. God wants the "common good", but speaking for the common good can get one accused of calling for class warfare – usually by the elites who control the political discussion and do not want much conversation about what God thinks of our political priorities.

But don't take my word for it. Just look at what the prophets say about the substance (or lack thereof) of our politics today. Clearly, the politics of God is different from ours – from the Republicans and the Democrats, the liberals and the conservatives, the Left and the Right. The politics of God makes them all look pretty bad and points the way to some pretty different directions. The famous biblical proverb says, "Without a vision, the people perish," and this is exactly what is happening to us right now. It's pretty obvious to see that it's time for new vision, and people across the political spectrum seem to agree with that.

Sermon

Jim Wallis is a progressive evangelical Christian who has had it with the way religion is used in America today. He has had it with the Christian right's moral litmus tests and the way it has forced its way into the political system, trying to impose its rigid morality on the American people. But he's also had it with the religious left's insistence that religion is only a private matter and that it has no place in the public realm. Neither approach, he says, comes close to touching the core of what it means to be a religious person. Religion is more than personal piety. It is more than simply what you believe about God or the afterlife or the nature of humanity. It is more than simplistic moralistic or ethical codes of conduct. When faithfulness is a way of life, you allow it to permeate every aspect of who you are.

Jim Wallis insists that religion is political. To make it anything less is an insult. When you look at the prophets of the Jewish Scriptures, when you read the Gospels of the New Testament, it's all about politics. And what does he mean by politics? By politics, he means the act of bringing justice to the world. It is the practice of a radical hospitality and a radical unconditional love that cannot rest while there is injustice. For Jim Wallis, to be a religious person is to be a restless person. Your faith has given you a vision of how this world can be, and the reality of what is falls so short of that vision that you will be compelled to act, to do your part to bring into being what you so believe in. So pray your heart out. Then go out and meet the world. Meditate until you've kissed that pure state of being, then go out and meet the world. Go to church and worship like there's no tomorrow. And then go out into the world and do good works.

Jim Wallis makes a lot of people uncomfortable. He makes conservative Christians nervous because he refuses to boil the Christian faith down to the test of whether you are pro-life and anti-gay. He also makes liberal Christians and other liberal religious people nervous because he criticizes their tendency to make religion only personal, without a public aspect to it. He criticizes the liberal assertion that secularism is neutral and religion is biased. Like many postmodernists, he would say that everyone has a worldview. Whether it is secular or religious, it will and should affect how we engage the world. It will and should affect the decisions we make. It will and should affect the people we decide to vote for in elections. And if you are a politician in office, it will and should affect the decisions you make as a leader.



And it is this assertion that has made liberal and progressive religious people very uncomfortable because it makes you wonder, is he bringing down the wall of separation between church and state. Isn't this what conservative religious people have been doing since Reagan tapped into the evangelical Christian vote to secure political office?

And he responds with strong words this challenge:

"Church and state can and must be separate in modern democracies," he says. "but spiritual values still undergird everything and are reflected in the society we live in, the social and political directions we choose, and the candidates we select."

In other words, he's saying that it's not an either/or proposition. It is a both and. You can have the separation of church and state AND live according to your spiritual values in both your public and private life. We can, in fact, we must, do it all.

It would be pretty easy for me to spend this sermon talking about the myriad of ways the religious right has stomped all over the separation of church and state. Sometimes preaching to the choir is just what the doctor ordered, particularly at a time like this when many of us, and I include myself in this, are extremely anxious about what is going to happen in two days. I have followed this election closely. Even though I am not an American citizen, I have lived in this country for four years and may live here for many years to come. I've actually got my eye on becoming an American citizen in time to vote in the 2016 Presidential campaign. How's that for long term strategic planning?

I have a stake in what happens here. When the candidate I do not support seems to be making gains, I don't do so well. When the candidate I do support makes gains, I do much better. Am I alone in this? I don't think so. As we get closer to Tuesday my anxiety level is rising, playing through worst case scenarios and daring to think about what success would feel like. Like so many, I have become very invested in what happens on Tuesday and even though I am so ready for this election to be over, I'm also nervous, not knowing what I will do or how I will respond if the candidate I support and believe in does not win on Tuesday.

But, I tell you, I would be remiss were I to deny that sometimes I have so wished to be able to use the power of this pulpit to support the candidates that I believe are best suited to lead us. I find it very frustrating to remain neutral. And I know that some of you do too. Some of you would love for your church to be able to play a role in an election that you care so passionately about. Many of us do, in our consciences, identify the candidates we support with many of our religious values and personally, there are times I would love the right to speak freely of that here and to use the moral authority of this pulpit and my position to fight for the candidates I believe in. And isn't it only human to want to use every resource at your disposal to promote the values that you hold dear, that you believe would make this a better world, with more justice, peace, equality, respect, and basic dignity.

And it's been especially tempting because the religious right has so often and so flagrantly used partisan politics to further their agendas. On September 28th, conservative Christian ministers across the country defied the IRS and went on record as supporting John McCain and the Republican party. Their goal is simple. Pulpit Freedom Sunday was intended to goad the IRS into prosecuting those ministers in the hope that a legal battle, taken as far as the Supreme Court with its two new conservative judges, would overturn the law that bans such endorsements. And then we would see the dropping of one more layer of that wall of separation between church and state.

But, then not only would those conservative ministers be able to loudly endorse whomever they might choose from their pulpits, so could we. We would not need to be silent about our partisan leanings. I mean, really, when you look at the buttons many of you have been wearing this fall, when you look at the bumper stickers in the parking lot, when you hear the talk at coffee hour, committee meetings and covenant groups, who are we kidding? It's pretty clear where the majority of the members of this congregation fall when it comes to partisan politics. Wouldn't this just allow us to be more honest about who we are and what we stand for? Wouldn't it give us more power to stand up to the religious right which has furthered agendas that we believe harm American families and this country? Wouldn't the ability for us to enter the partisan realm just level the playing field?

If Pulpit Freedom Sunday were successful in overturning the IRS ban on political endorsements by religious organizations, there would be some who would celebrate. But, there are many, including an increasing number of evangelical Christians, who would not be celebrating, because they have begun to understand the price they are paying for stepping into the partisan fray.



Some, like Rich Warren of Saddleback Church, have grown frustrated with the narrowing focus of evangelical Christianity as it has become more partisan. While he has a conservative position on homosexuality and abortion, he believes, as Jim Wallis does, that his faith calls him to more. How can you claim to be pro-life if you're pro-war. Isn't poverty a pro-life issue? Aren't health care and the environment pro-life issues? Many evangelicals are having a hard time finding the theory of trickle down economics in the Bible. Some have become suspicious that the Party used homosexuality and abortion as carrots on a stick, and once their votes secured electoral wins, it was business as usual. And then came the scandals - Abu Graib, Guantanamo, a war that the majority of Americans now see as unjust and unnecessary, Tom Delay, Mark Foley, Jack Abramoff, Larry Craig, Ted Stevens. Every scandal in the Republican Party now casts a shadow on evangelical Christianity itself.

And it's also become clear that the Republican Party paid a price. Sure, it won the last two presidential elections, but moderate conservatives, like Colin Powell, have been pushed out of their own party. It hasn't always been the case that such a huge majority of UUs supported the Democratic Party. There used to be many more Republican UUs, but as the party moved right, those people have been alienated. The cost to the Republican Party of its own willingness to cross that church/state separation, is that it looks less and less like a cross-section of America and more and more like those who sit in predominantly white evangelical churches.

I keep imagining that King from our children's story, so certain of his high standing, weighing himself down with jewels so heavily that he can barely stand, demanding what no one should be able to demand - absolute loyalty from his subjects. Both the Republican Party and the Evangelical Right have become like that King ... seeking power and status through this unholy alliance, and then being burdened by the baggage of the other, and both being less free to be who they are called to be. When the wall between church and state comes down, both wind up in the mud. .

Now lest you think I am here only to criticize the alliance between Republican and Evangelical, the Democrats are not blameless. In some ways, they're trying to play catch up. The whole political religious landscape has changed. It is now impossible to do politics without a faith component. When Rick Warren interviewed the presidential candidates, it would have been political suicide for either candidate to decline. Both McCain and Obama have felt sustained pressure to declare their Christian faith. In this election campaign, a religious test has been applied to these candidates, something that is explicitly forbidden in the constitution. And neither candidate could publicly challenge that without losing votes.

I know that it is tempting for religious progressives like us to try and even the stakes by throwing in their lot with the Democrats, but we would be wise to hold back from identifying that party with our religious values because sometimes they do not match up. Unitarian Universalists, for example, strongly support the legalization of same-sex marriage. Neither Hillary Clinton nor Barack Obama do. Now you can argue, and many have, that this is a public relations stance necessary to win the election, that deep in their hearts, both these candidates support same-sex marriage, they just can't say it. And even if that is true, do we want to identify with a compromise that still denies core civil rights to sexual minorities?

A more dramatic example in this election is the issue of poverty. Not one of the presidential candidates is talking about poverty, despite the fact that one of them entered politics because of his commitment to addressing poverty. Everyone is talking about the middle class and there's no doubt about it, the middle class is struggling. But the suffering didn't start with the imploding of the sub-prime mortgage industry. For those who are truly at the bottom of the pile, there's no bail out package, never has been. In fact, even with a Democratic controlled congress, cuts keep being made to programs aimed at addressing poverty. There is no political advantage to campaigning for the poorest of the poor. And why is that?

First of all, everyone wants to be middle class and many will claim a middle class identity even when it's not really the case. Because what is the key component of middle class identity? Being self-made. In control of your destiny. The nature of poverty is to be, in part, at the mercy of forces out of your control. To look at the reality of poverty is to acknowledge how most of us are also at the mercy of forces out of our control. Given our civil religion of individualism, that's not gonna go over well! To campaign for the elimination of poverty in a country where we are encouraged to be willfully blind about our own powerlessness and interconnectedness means certain loss in an election. John Edwards can certainly testify to that.

Furthermore, most campaigns are not about convincing people to be generous. That has proven not to work. People are looking for the bottom line. What's in it for me? How is my life going to be better? For instance, the Obama campaign has a



"Religion, Politics and Partisanship"
Rev. Krista Taves
November 2, 2008

Emerson UU Chapel, Ellisville MO

website you can go to and compare your taxes under Obama and under McCain. While strategically good, what's its message? Vote for the candidate who leaves more money in your pocket.

My question as a religious person, as a Unitarian Universalist committed to affirm and promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations, is this. What are the consequences? Who is going to pay for that tax cut? Why not create a website showing who bears the burden for every extra tax dollar you have in your pocket? You get \$10 off your taxes? Three kids lose their lunch program. You get \$1000 off your taxes? So much for those bridge repairs! You get \$20 000 off? I guess we'll just put off that research and development for alternative energy and we can continue compromising our security and our earth by remaining dependent on foreign oil. The whole business of tax cuts as an election platform panders to the most selfish parts of who we are and yet both candidates know they have to go there to win the election. At some level, it has to be all about us.

And that is diametrically opposed to what it means to be a religious person. We no longer live simply for ourselves. Our lives do not belong to us. They belong to the service of a higher good and for us to chain our religious values to a partisan agenda will compromise our ability to be and do what our faith calls us to do.

To use Jim Wallis' words, God's politics are not our politics. Now I know that not all of us believe in God or even believe in the same god, but there is a universal truth here. Human politics are fraught with competing interests, compromises, ideological agendas, and always, the need to win the next election. But there is a sacred politics, a politics of a radical equality and justice and generosity we can barely comprehend and that our human politics barely touch. This politics reigns in a much larger hall of justice and that's the politics to which we as religious people ultimately belong.

By all means, support your candidate; give them your money and your time. Vote and then help others to vote. But know that in the end we answer to something much larger. Let us not limit our ability to answer that call.

Amen and blessed be.